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आवश्यक सूचना : "प्रज्ञा" पत्रिका के इस अंक में छपे हुए सभी लेखों/शोध-प्रपत्रों में व्यक्त विचार लेखकों के स्वयं के विचार हैं। उनसे सम्पादक, प्रकाशक अथवा विश्वविद्यालय प्रशासन का सहमत होना आवश्यक नहीं है।

THE EPIDEMIC OF COVID – 19 AND INDIAN SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM

VISHAL GUPTA* & DR. VANDANA VERMA**

For the schools being locked down due to COVID-19 epidemic, educationists across the country are moving to virtual classes to ensure learning never stops. Policy makers not only enable teachers and students to connect over video-enabled remote classrooms but also provide a host of interactive and collaborative apparatus on a single platform. Here are examples of Indian education institutions that are using classes on WhatsApp group, and various networking sites for remote learning. In the same, The British School in New Delhi is a 57-year-old education institution. The school moved to Microsoft Teams even before the COVID-19 lockdown, to enable its teachers and students interact and collaborate in remote/online learning scenarios.

“Human beings in general thrive on social interaction, which was missing in traditional e-learning platforms. You can never really replace a teacher because the teacher provides that human interaction, but as I think platforms like Teams enable a teacher to be able to reach out to their classroom remotely and continue to interact,” says Vanita Uppal OBE, director of The British School.

An enormous majority of the relief and rehabilitation packages announced following the nationwide lockdown in India have focused on economic remedy. However, the education sector has remained absent from this effort, including in India's central government's 250 billion dollar stimulus package¹. In this paper, we ought to discuss the implementation of lockdown-induced school and rural child-care center closures on education and health outcomes for the urban and rural poor. We especially focus on food and nutritional security of children who depend on school feeding and supplementary nutrition programs. We argue that the impacts are likely to be much more severe for girls as well as for children from already destitute ethnic and caste groups. We also discuss ways in which existing social security programs can be leveraged and strengthened to ameliorate these impacts.

Gender With India slowly starting to open its economy back up, following months of nationwide Covid-19 induced lockdown, schools and colleges across the country have now been shut for over three months. Even as the lockdown ends, it is unlikely that educational institutions will re-open for months. This closure has come at a critical point in the education calendar of India, marked by school final assessments, school leaving examinations and entrance tests for undergraduate and post-graduate courses. What does this disruption imply for students across the socio-economic spectrum, both in terms of learning outcomes and food and economic security, and how can policymakers moderate these impacts? In this article I will try to discuss some of the consequences of the lockdown on the education sector and the steps that have been taken by various state and central bodies to address these consequences. Finally, I suggest ways in which existing social security nets and provisions can be addressed to support young and school-age children affected by the lockdown².

1) **Impact on dropout rates** –As per data of UNESCO, approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Of these, almost 84% reside in rural areas while 70% attend government schools. As of 2015, the average dropout rate across secondary schools in India was 17.06% with higher numbers for rural areas (NUEPA 2016)³. Our past experience suggests that short term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among the poor. One reason for this is the loss of parents' employment for which child labor is geared up as a substitute. The inevitable economic backlash of the lockdown is likely to reduce the earning capacity for many poor households and may increase the opportunity cost of sending children to school, especially in rural India. As a result, children may be pushed into the market of labor. Dropout rates are likely to be even more severe for girls who are often left out of

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household' decisions for resource allocation. Females may also be required to undertake additional household responsibilities as parents increase their own labor hours to cope with economic distress. Similarly, these economic shocks are likely to have a greater impact on children from communities that are marginalized (on the basis of their caste, tribe and religion).

- 2) **Unaffordable Educational expenditure-** Without school fee waivers in the interim, dropout rates are likely to get further accelerated as educational expenses become unaffordable for many guardians. Although some states governments such as those of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand tried to initiate waivers for tuition and other school expenses during the lockdown period, private schools are looking unenthusiastic to implement these measures.
- 3) **Adverse effect on inequality and disparity-** A key step taken by some educational institutions to ensure continuation of curriculum has been to shift lectures online, requiring both students and teachers to use personal home computers and reliable internet. If school and university examinations happen as scheduled, without compensatory classes, it is likely to disadvantage students who cannot access these computer and network resources⁵. However, postponement of examinations can cause a delay for students in entering the job market. The discourse on education during the lockdown period has been essentially focused on online or televised learning.
- 4) **Digital learning goals must be set by authority--** In fact, the only mention of education in the Government of India's USD 260 billion fiscal stimulus packages is in the context of online and digital learning platforms. A number of Indian states including Mizoram, West Bengal and Kashmir have implemented daily televised lectures as the Human Resource Development (education) Ministry ties up with television service providers to allocate specific channels for this purpose.
- 5) **Rural and urban differences--** However, these measures preclude the rural and urban poor with limited or no access to electricity and network

resources. Moreover, online classes are being facilitated largely for students who attend urban private schools, and already outperform government school students on most indicators of learning. The higher use of online learning platforms by private schools will increase this disparity⁴.

- 6) **Effect on nutrition and food security -**One of the most important consequences of the lockdown and subsequent school closures has been the temporary suspension of mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition programs, which has widespread and important setback for the nutrition and food security of children across the nation. The Mid-day Meal (MDM) program in India is the largest school feeding program in the world (World Food Program 2013). This flagship program aims to provide cooked meals to all government primary school children, meeting a stipulated minimum calorie and protein requirement. The MDM program, besides eliminating classroom hunger, also addresses health issues such as micronutrient deficiencies and mass deforming. In case of economically disadvantaged families, MDM's school meals act more as a substitute rather than a complementary meal, protecting against endemic hunger for the entire family. The months of lockdown in India have already caused supply chain disruptions in the agriculture sector, leading to food shortages (Reardon et al. 2020). Interruption in school feeding programs is thus likely to exacerbate food insecurity, particularly for those who are already under-nourished, especially girls, who like older women, eat last and eat less at home, compared to boys and men⁵.
- 7) **Lack of fund available to India--**The Global Partnership for Education has recently announced a \$250 million fund to help 67 developing countries (excluding India) cope with immediate and long-term disruptions to education as a result of the pandemic (GPE 2020). This fund, to be utilized with a special focus on girls and poor children, aims to encourage investments in learning resources that will reach those who will most likely be unable to resume learning when schools reopen. In India too, local solutions by several state governments have been implemented, but there

is scope for much more. Children in certain southern states (Kerala, Telangana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) have benefited millions of children and expecting mothers already. Other measures including data packages for students, TV broadcasted classes and regular SMS/IVR to parents for daily activities with children are currently underway. Moving forward, the immediate need is to expand access to nutritious food for all children eligible for school feeding programs nationwide. In addition, re-directing locally produced horticultural crops to households under the MDM and ICDS umbrella can help improve nutrient content and diet diversity for children and provide temporary relief to farmers through local requirement. Along with interventions in the education sector, initiatives are also needed to cushion the economic impact on poor families to discourage the use of child labor along with monitoring mechanisms set up to ensure children remain in school, whenever they re-open.

And the last but not the least there is also the issue of mental stress and trauma that young children may be facing, both as a result of reduced mobility due to the lockdown and the economic stress being faced by families- an issue that has remained largely absent from the current discourse. In such a context, collaborative effort between the public sector, the private sector, and the civil society would be critical for educational and social rehabilitation of affected children. As health and economy occupies the centre stage, educational and nutritional considerations must not be forgotten so as to not undo the hard-earned gains in these sectors over the past few decades.

In what extent will schools need to change in the post-Covid-19 era?

According to my point of view the Covid-19 epidemic has changed the way we study, work, and live. Thanks to social distancing norms, schools now need to plan certain design changes for the post-Covid-19 world. Here is the administrative, infrastructural and psychological changes schools need⁶.

- Covid-19 has changed the way we live and study, prompting us to rethink the schools and colleges are re structured and redesigned.

- Social distancing norms make it important to think about crucial design changes in educational institutes.

Conclusion

As a scholar by my profession, the hesitation of sending children back to what was once a safe-haven is an obvious question in mind for many of us? Any crisis presents the opportunity to help them learn, cultivate compassion, and increase resilience while building a safer and more caring community.

As a caretaker, we must have the right information on Covid-19, to diminish students' fears and anxieties around the virus, as we all gear up to head back to school soon! Several considerations must be taken into account to maintain safe school activity, and if done correctly, it can promote emotional and physical well-being.

In my point of view educational institutes will, and must take corrective measures at all levels. Design standards on SOPs can help schools and colleges maintain ideal social distancing norms to prevent the spread of the virus while allowing us to inch back as close to the true normal.

While certainly, the design changes needed will be vary from school to school, here are the main changes we will see in school design in the post-Covid-19 world⁷.

(a) Administrative changes in post-Covid-19 schools

1. Abiding by the new norms of social distancing is a big challenge confronted by schools as they look to open up.
2. Working in shifts or staggering school timings will be beneficial. This can be enabled by allowing for batches at different hours.
3. Important exams can be conducted on different dates, thereby reducing the number of working hours and physical interaction amongst students in schools.
4. All team sports activity, as well as spectator sports, need to be put on hold. This would also imply a reduction in activity class hours, thereby helping reduce working hours for children and teachers.
5. Art as an activity can be continued with social distancing in mind as it allows stimulating the creativity of the children.

6. Providing parents with an option to opt for classroom teaching or online can help regulate the number of students in a classroom. Installing a camera in every classroom will allow students to study from home on a virtual platform as well. It will considerably reduce the physical footfall in the school.

As I think the necessity of teaching and learning with asynchronous platforms (Canvas, Blackboard, D2L) and synchronous (Zoom) platforms also yield significant benefits, when both methods can be adopted.

(b) Infrastructural changes in schools after Covid-19

1. Considering that WHO prescribes physical distancing of at least 1 metre between students in school, the removal of standard twin benches at school would be of utmost priority.
2. The new classroom design should allow for increased circulation of fresh air indoors, and classes must be held outdoors as much as possible to reduce contamination.
3. Sanitation stations should be installed in every classroom and vinyl floor markings can be used to ensure unidirectional movement in all passages and corridors. Essentially, the class strength needs to be halved in the physical space by either increasing the number of rooms or by going in for a combination of real-time classes and online classes.

(c) Psychological changes schools need after Covid-19

1. It is necessary to show empathy towards the teachers; Working full time, managing multiple roles, grappling with technology and yet smiling

and greeting the children to ensure a happy learning environment.

2. As schools reopen under appropriate health and safety protocols, school leaders will confront a new set of challenges including syllabus timelines and teaching methodologies, remedial academic support, new sanitation guidelines and possibly closing schools again in response to public health needs.
3. A new set of challenges will come our way once schools reopen under appropriate health and safety guidelines. School administrators will need to rework syllabus timelines, teaching methodologies, and remedial academic support.

While the hurdles seem insurmountable, the result will lead to learning for students, professional work environments for parents, and an eventual balance in the society.

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